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ABSTRACT

Emotion scripts provide children with culturally meaningful emotional experiences and plans of action for managing feelings and the circumstances surrounding emotional experiences. In an effort to understand how developing children acquire these emotion scripts, two studies described here investigated how children deploy emotion scripts to manage challenging social exchanges. A third study investigated children's beliefs about coping strategies. The first study (1984) used the disappointing gift paradigm in which children thought they would get something desirable when they did not. Results indicated that 6- to 8-year-olds, especially boys, expressed negative emotions to communicate their disapproval of the gift. Ten- to 11-year-olds, especially girls, focused on ensuring that the gift-giver would approve of them, and avoided hurting the gift-giver's feelings. The second study (1992) involved children's expectancies for how to cheer up a despondent person who had previously been very friendly. Seven-year-olds tended to look generally negative, while 12-year-olds produced the most positive expressive behavior along with the most tension behaviors. In the third study (in press), a normal and a sexually abused sample of 6- to 8-year-olds and 10- to 12-year-olds selected the best and worst coping strategies and justified their choice. There were no age, gender, or abuse-related differences in selected strategies. Younger children provided more simplistic justifications than older children. Problem-solving was most often cited as the best coping strategy when feeling shamed or angry, support-seeking when sad, and both strategies when fearful. Distancing was identified as the best strategy when one's feelings were hurt. Aggression was overwhelmingly selected as the worst option regardless of situation. (Contains 20 references.) (KDFB)

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Emotion Management and Strategies for Social Interaction

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Emotion Management and Strategies for Social Interaction

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As social scientists we may think of emotion in terms of components (e.g., an emotion-eliciting context, appraisal, somatic experience, behavior), but when we consider "real life experience," we must ask how these components are integrated within an individual and communicated across relationships. In short, emotional experience may be fragmented for the sake of psychological scrutiny, but when we ourselves are emotional, we do not typically experience our feelings as disconnected entities. It is particularly noticeable in the disclosure of emotional experience to others that we see the integration of emotional experience with context (e.g., Rime, 1995; G. White, 1993). Social constructivists have proposed that we **learn** to give meaning to our context-dependent emotional experience via our social exposure to emotion discourse and narrative and our cognitive developmental capacities. In this sense, a social-constructivist approach to emotion is highly individualized: One's emotional experience is contingent on specific contexts, unique social history, and current cognitive developmental functioning. Our unique social history includes our immersion in our culture's beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions, our observation of important others, and the patterns of reinforcement from those with whom we are significantly involved. All of these factors contribute to our learning what it means to feel something and then do something about it. The concepts we assign to emotional experience are saturated with nuance and context-dependent meaning, including the social roles we occupy, such as gender and age roles.

But how exactly does this "context-dependent meaning of emotional experience" come about and become accessible to the developing child? In order to answer this question, I have

found useful the notion of emotion script.

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transparency for script definition

Theorists such as Geoffrey White (1994) and Richard Schweder (1993) have defined emotion scripts as interpretive schemes that provide a routine or plan for making sense of emotional experience in ways that are meaningful to the individual. However, we are still addressing a very abstract construct that does not readily allow us to see how scripts are pragmatically used, especially in social interaction (cf. E. Goffman, 1967). I elaborate below the theoretical position taken by Abelson (1981) that permits us to specify exactly how scripts might operate.

Scripts have been hypothesized as providing us with a set of inferences about how certain situations "ought" to unfold. Scripts entail sequential expectancies and as such, they allow us to access our beliefs about a predictable event sequence (Abelson, 1981). What Abelson has also emphasized is that scripts require learning: One must learn that antecedent and consequent events are meaningfully linked, indeed, "enabled," to use Abelson's term. What this means is that when one of these antecedent events occurs, an expectancy is activated to embark upon a course of action that follows the script. However, scripts are much more complex than simple habitual routines: They are fluid cognitive constructions that have built into them variability that takes into account contextual features. For example, we might have a script about anger that unfolds generally as follows:

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insert transparency for anger script

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(1) An offense occurs that is perceived as intentional, (2) the offended person experiences intense negative emotion with accompanying physiological changes, (3) the offended person directs expression of negative emotion at the offender, (4) the offended person considers retribution, (5) the offended person undertakes reciprocal harm to the offender. Let's concretize this sequence with an example:

Kate and Ellen transparency

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1. 11-year-old Kate felt betrayed (offense) when Ellen blabbed all over the class the secret she had told her, namely, that her parents were getting divorced (Ellen's act was intentional and harmful to an innocent person).
2. While sitting at her desk, she felt herself getting hot and tense; she broke the tip of her pencil pressing down so hard on the paper (physical changes accompanying the negative emotion).
3. Kate glared at Ellen across the classroom (expression of negative emotion directed at the offender).
4. Kate knew that Ellen secretly liked a boy in the class named Tony; she imagined what she could do to Ellen to get back at her (retribution).
5. During the next recess Kate sneaked back into the classroom and put a note on Ellen's chair seat that said, "Tony says you are ugly and stupid." She added to the note a picture of a cross-eyed, stringy-haired face for good measure (reciprocal harm done to the offender).

Given that we learn variability as part of this anger script, then that variability can

influence each of the five sub-events listed above. The degree of perceived intentionality may range from none to being viewed as crucial and necessary for anger to be felt; the offended individual may not be aware of any accompanying physiological emotion-state change, and there might be even limited awareness of feeling angry; perhaps "irritation" or despondency is felt instead. The expression of anger at the offender is highly variable: Risk of retribution from a more dominant individual or if the expression of anger violates still other scripts may suppress this sub-event. The offended person may consider retribution, but whether it is actually undertaken, simply imagined, or flatly discounted as valid behavior will depend on contextual influence as well as on other scripts the individual may have that countermand the generic anger script. For example, a parent may be angry at her preadolescent, but she does not seek reciprocal harm because of her beliefs about appropriate parenting behavior.

My thinking about emotion scripts has also been much influenced by Jim Russell's work (e.g., Russell, 1991), and he notes that even within the same culture scripts for the same emotions may differ from person to person, for emotion scripts are linked to other belief networks, including scripts about the self and about the social roles we occupy. I take Russell's point here seriously, for when we link a script for an emotion such as anger to a network of concepts we have about, for example, our sex role "adequacy," then the anger script may well have additional emphases or omissions if our machismo or our femininity is implicated in the anger episode. Consider, for example, the possible linkages between scripts for shame and scripts for gender role. The shame-rage cycle seen in male batterers and the frequent occurrence of shame-depression seen in women -- also addressed by Michael Lewis (1992) -- may illustrate intersecting scripts for emotion and gender role. I am also intrigued by the possible linkages between emotion scripts and scripts having to do with self-concept and self-attributions (see also Eder, 1994). Indeed,

what we refer to as self-conscious emotions may in fact represent an interplay of scripts about standards for behavior and scripts about how the self plays a causal role in events.

Obviously scripts vary from culture to culture and how emotion scenarios are thought to unfold as predictable sequences has been addressed by many social scientists. Just examining the many chapters in Russell's and his colleagues' (1995) recent edited volume on Everyday conceptions of emotion suggests how rich this area is for descriptive research. Our notion of folk theories of emotion is essentially a collection of scripts held by a given culturally defined group that may be tied together by an over-arching dynamic or functional theme. I offer the following metaphors, which capture these over-arching themes, for several common superordinate scripts about emotion functioning that characterize everyday North American thinking:

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folk theories of emotion transparency

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1. The Volcano Theory ("if you don't vent your emotions, you'll explode")
2. The Tidal Wave Theory ("your feelings can build up until they overwhelm you")
3. The Out-of-Sight/Out-of-Mind Theory ("if you don't think about it, it'll go away")
4. The Vulcan Theory from Star Trek ("your emotions are irrational and illogical, surely they get in the way of solving problems")

Now consider some beliefs about emotion from a decidedly different culture: Wierzbicka (1994) provides the following examples from a longer list of liver images, used by the Austronesion people Mangap-Mbula of New Guinea, for describing what we in English might call feelings:

Mangap-Mbula liver terms for emotions

Expression	English Equivalent
kete- (I)malmal	angry (liver is fighting)
kete- (I)bayou	very angry (liver feels hot)
kete- pitpit	get excited too quickly (liver jumps)
kete- ikam ken	startled (liver does snapping)
kete- kutkut	anxious (liver beats)
kete- patnana	calm, unmoved, long-suffering (liver is rocklike)

Wierzbicka suggests that what diverse cultures have in common is the more generic term feeling and that the concept of emotion, if it is used to refer solely to internally experienced subjective states, may be very much limited to an Anglo-Saxon view. She concludes that "people all over the world...link feelings with notions of what people do and say and of *what they regard as good or bad*." (p. 155, 1994; my italics). It is this linkage of feelings with expectations of human action, which is more often social than not, and with evaluation of desirable or undesirable outcomes that yields discernible emotion scripts. To claim that one's liver is snapping does not qualify as a script per se; it needs to be linked with a predictable sequence of events. Perhaps the Mangap-Mbula script would take the form of "something quite unexpected happened, causing my liver to do some snapping, and it would be a good idea to find out what caused this unexpected event." But, who knows, perhaps their script would dictate instead that when one's liver starts snapping, then some spirits are sneaking about, and one must undertake appeasement rituals. In sum, we will find cultural similarities if we stay with fairly general statements about human beings'

propensities to feel, and we will find diversity when we venture into specific cultural scripts that vary in the meanings attributed to antecedents of emotional experience, in what are viewed as desirable goals, and even in the concept of emotion itself.

But let us return to children. Children learn emotion scripts not as full-blown symbolic structures, but cumulatively through such emotion-laden interactions as social referencing (Walden, 1991), narrative interaction with others (Miller & Sperry, 1987), exposure to emotional events (Gordon, 1989), significant others' socializing responses to emotional-expressive behavior (Saarni, 1993), and so forth. Not surprisingly, emotion scripts become more complex as cognition develops and the social domain expands. How might one examine emotion script deployment among children? There are at least four strategies available for empirical purposes.

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show transparencies of 4 strategies here

(a) One strategy is to examine how children behave when a social expectation is violated. When this happens, the antecedent event within a script has occurred, but the predicted consequence has not, and children are pressed to manage both the unexpected social interaction as well as regulate their own emotional experience in it. (b) Another method is to sample directly developmental differences in children's deployment of complex script understanding in social-emotional interaction, such as "how do you cheer someone up?" That is, one can take a particular emotion-laden social interaction and examine the developmental differences that occur in children's interactive behavior (e.g., interpersonal negotiation skills). These developmental differences should reflect differences in the children's cognitive complexity and social maturity such that their understanding of the script(s) surrounding the emotion-laden interaction influences how they

respond in the interaction. (c) A third strategy is to elicit from children their expectancies about "good" and "bad" consequences as a result of some emotional experience. "Good" consequences are more likely to represent consensually defined and predicted script outcomes; "bad" outcomes are due to not following the socially prescribed script sequence. (d) Lastly, a strategy that is currently popular is to collect narratives told to children, about children, or that are overheard by children such that children acquire verbally-mediated representations about views of the world, attitudes toward others as well as toward the child, and beliefs about the self (e.g., Miller, 1994). Narratives embody multiple scripts, and narratives and scripts are structurally similar: Both are typically based on personally meaningful events, they are causally and temporally ordered, and they are oriented toward value-laden outcomes, namely goals.

Research on Script Deployment

I shall briefly describe three studies; two of them were concerned with how children deploy emotion scripts in order to manage challenging social exchanges, and they reflect the first and second strategies noted above. The third study used a social cognitive approach to investigate children's beliefs about "good" and "bad" coping strategies, their consequences relative to the situation, and relative to how one would feel afterwards. Developmental differences are noted in the summaries below as are differences associated with such social categories as gender.

The first study used what has come to be called the "disappointing gift paradigm;" the anticipated script sequence of events that was violated was that children thought they would get something desirable when they did not (Saarni, 1984). Children could manage the social transaction by accomplishing three tasks or goals: (a) How to let the misguided gift-giver know that the gift was a poor one, (b) how to make sure the gift-giver would approve of oneself, and

(c) how to avoid hurting the feelings of the misguided gift-giver. Utilization of emotion scripts flows from these value-laden goals: Showing one's disgruntlement might inform the gift-giver that s/he erred in the choice of gift; alternatively, one could smile politely so that the gift-giver will think one is well-behaved; or one could also smile, thereby sparing the gift-giver of feeling embarrassed by the inadequate choice of gift (these latter two goals may be indistinguishable in their effects). What emerged was that the emotion script for the "disappointing gift paradigm" produced multi-faceted effects: 6-8-year-olds, especially little boys, appeared to focus on the first social task, producing negative emotional-expressive behavior that communicated their disapproval of the gift. 10-11-year-olds, especially girls, may have focused on the latter two social goals, for they produced exceptionally gracious smiles, suggesting that the so-called "disappointing gift paradigm" is not about a gift per se for girls; it is simply another interesting social interaction (Davis, 1994).

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show slides of 1984 study here

A second study examined children's expectancies for how to cheer up a despondent "market researcher" who previously had been very friendly (Saarni, 1992). The social task to be accomplished seemed straight-forward, but the management of one's own emotions and behavior presented complex challenges in this case. Being confronted with this depressed woman could make oneself sad, angered that one had glibly agreed to try to cheer her up, or challenged to try to make her happier. The data revealed developmental and gender influences: The youngest children (7 years) tended to look generally negative; the oldest children (12 years) appeared more self-contained, producing the most positive expressive behavior, but also the most tension

behaviors. Boys more often demonstrated an aggravated, table-thumping, posture-shifting set of behaviors, and older girls more often smiled and made eye contact.

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show slides of 1992 study here

In the third study (Saarni, in press) children, ages 6-8 and 10-12 years, participated in a social cognition study on expectancies for how to cope when feeling sad, angry, afraid, hurt, or ashamed. A comparison sample of sexually abused children was also included. Five hypothetical vignettes, each featuring one of the preceding emotions, were designed such that controllability of outcome, intensity of emotion, and degree of affiliation between protagonists was controlled; the children were provided with coping strategies, including problem-solving, support-seeking, distancing, internalizing, and externalizing options. Children chose the "best" and "worst" coping strategies and justified their choices as well as responded to what they would do in a similar situation. Results indicated that there were no age, gender, or abuse-related differences in which strategy was selected as "best" or "worst" for any of the emotion-linked vignettes; however, younger children tended to provide more simplistic justifications. Problem-solving was most often cited as the "best" coping strategy when feeling shamed or angry, support-seeking when feeling sad, and both problem-solving and support-seeking were equally nominated when fearful. Distancing was viewed as the "best" strategy when one's feelings were hurt. Children overwhelmingly chose the aggressive externalizing coping strategy as the "worst" option across all emotion stories, and both social and non-social consequences were cited as the justification for why it was the least desirable coping strategy. Children's scripts were well-anchored in context and socially shared meanings as illustrated in a few of the justifications they offered as to why a

particular coping strategy was the "best."

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show transparency here of children's justifications:

7-year-old female, after choosing the distancing coping strategy when protagonist felt hurt: "Maybe if she did that [walked away from the other kids teasing her about her new jacket], it wouldn't hurt her feelings, because she wouldn't hear what they are saying."

8-year-old female, after choosing the problem-solving strategy when protagonist felt afraid about a big growling dog: "It's better to be late and go the other way than get chewed up, because if you're chewed up, your arm would be really hurt."

11-year-old female, after choosing the problem-solving strategy when protagonist is angered by a friend's irresponsibility: "Debbie would probably get a new ball in the end, and Allison and Debbie would still be friends."

11-year-old male, after choosing the externalizing strategy when protagonist felt shamed by the teasing received over his pants ripping open on the playground: "He'd get even with him [for teasing him about the ripped pants], but he'd feel kinda' gross because he forgot his underwear, and that's kinda' stupid."

In sum, these children had learned very well by the early school years what were the socially approved scripts for dealing with aversive feelings and circumstances, including for the last preadolescent boy cited above the "necessity" for maintaining one's status. Yet it is also readily apparent that knowing what is socially sanctioned as a coping strategy is not necessarily how children actually behave when they are feeling scared, angry, hurt, sad, or ashamed. A critical

missing ingredient that links scripts and immediate, contextualized behavior is the self's perceived vulnerability. But that is a topic for another paper or perhaps for the discussant.....

Conclusion

Scripts provide children with culturally meaningful emotional experience, *and* they provide plans of action for managing both one's feeling state and the circumstances surrounding the emotional experience. In this sense, scripts span a time frame that extends from emotion elicitation through emotion management and culminates in adaptive social-situational behavior. With development children both acquire and further revise their emotion scripts such that subtlety and complexity become more accessible to them in their emotional experience and in their interpersonal negotiation skills. I close with a quote from Erving Goffman, who would have nodded "ritualistically" in agreement with much of what I have said today:

> Even when a child demands something and is refused, he is likely to cry and sulk not as an irrational expression of frustration but as a ritual move, conveying that he already has a face to lose and that its loss is not to be permitted lightly. Sympathetic parents may even allow for such display, seeing in these crude strategies the beginnings of a social self. (1967; p. 23).

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